

Against the Grain

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Considering Games in Libraries and Such – On using a Game to Actually Teach Something. Part I: The Accidental Learner

Jared Alexander Seay

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27, 2017 long-form *Guardian* article, “Is the Staggeringly Profitable Business of Scientific Publishing Bad for Science?” by **Stephen Buryani**.) So much publishing activity could be justified by two insights: that journals covering the same discipline or sub-discipline don’t actually compete for subscribers and readers (papers are unique, after all) and subscription prices can be raised even as more and more journals are being published — providing, of course, that libraries have the wherewithal.

Maxwell knew how to make his journals succeed. Titles often started with “International Journal of,” a feature which recognized the growing globalization of scientific and technical work and research. He was adept at drawing journal editors and contributors close to him. According to a brief memoir written by **Brian Cox**, who worked at **Pergamon** for three decades, **Maxwell** himself made telephone calls to them and correspondence appeared above his signature. And he wasn’t bashful about wining and dining them, often at **Pergamon’s** splendid headquarters at a 53-room mansion, Headington Hill Hall, to which the company began migrating in 1959 from its original base in London.

It had been built for the **Morrells**, a local brewery family, who lived there for 114 years, until it was used as a military hospital during World War II, then as a rehabilitation center after the war ended. **Maxwell** leased Headington Hill Hall from the Oxford City Council, which had bought it from the **Morrells**. He and his wife renovated the property.

Maxwell was mercurial and autocratic. According to **Brian Cox**, **Maxwell’s** office was located in the mansion’s largest room. His desk was in the corner furthest from the door. To reach the desk, you would have to traverse a great expanse of floor. Upon arrival, you would

be asked a question. The correct answer would allow you to be seated and you would be given something to drink. Give the wrong answer, and you would have to remain standing.

Whatever his temperament and the way he treated his subordinates, he did know how to run a journal publishing business. Sales results were terrific. According to **Brian Cox**, journal circulation grew by five to ten percent each year during the 1960s. Prices must have increased, as well. One advantage of continually growing the number of titles, **Cox** notes, was that older, established titles would subsidize newer titles that were still finding their audience.

If you were to propose a candidate for founder of the modern commercial journal publishing business, could you find a better candidate than **Robert Maxwell**? He was cosmopolitan; he’s said to have spoken nine languages and he spoke BBC English. He was no doubt able to exhibit enthusiasm for scientific discovery and for the means of reporting on discoveries. He was adept at deferring to the wishes of scientists and he knew how to pamper them with his nosh and his wines. He managed to become the confidant of his authors and editors, through flattery, no doubt, and with his continual telephoning and correspondence. He recognized an obligation to please editors and authors with speed of journal article publication, as well as with the physical quality of his journals. He was fearless in expanding **Pergamon’s** journal portfolio. There were his insights about pricing and competition. He ran his company like a dictator so that, I presume everything would be done his way, which in his mind — and the results spoke for themselves — was the right, and only way to get done what had to be done.

Unfortunately there was also a great appetite for status, fame, and fortune. **Maxwell** was driven around in a Rolls-Royce; there was a helicopter and a 200-foot yacht, called the *Lady Ghislaine*. He served as a Labour Member of Parliament from 1964 to 1970.

He bought the London based **Mirror Group Newspapers** in 1984. He bought the American publisher, **Macmillan**, for \$2.6 billion. He was chairman of a British professional football team. He owned, among other properties, **Nimbus Records**, **Prentice Hall Information Services** and the **Berlitz** language schools. He also owned a half-share of **MTV** in Europe and other European television interests. In 1990, he founded a transnational newspaper, *The European*, which I can actually remember reading. (It folded in December 1998.)

His reputation, outside of STM journal publishing was in bad shape. Except for the **Mirror Group**, British press barons refused to sell their properties to him. The satirical weekly, *Private Eye*, called him the “Bouncing Czech,” a nickname **Prime Minister Harold Wilson** had bestowed on him when he was an MP. He was continuously litigious.

In 1991, **Maxwell** was so much in debt (he’d recently scooped up the *NY Daily News* when it was in bad straits, not a smart financial move) that he had to sell **Pergamon**. **Elsevier** bought the company, which published thousands of reference works, in addition to the journals, for 440 million pounds — something like a billion pounds today — which strikes me as a steal. Then his life really ended. He went missing off his yacht near the Canary Islands and was later fished out of the sea. It was, most likely, suicide. He was facing not only mounting debts, but also the impending revelation that he had bilked his employees’ pension funds. (Conspiracy theories still abound, however, perhaps due to allegations that he was an agent of Israel’s Mossad.) His death and disgrace may be the things he’ll be remembered for, more so, I would guess, than for his **Pergamon** stewardship — for better or worse, depending on where you stand on the creation of modern commercial STM journal publishing. 🌿

Considering Games in Libraries and Such — On using a Game to Actually Teach Something. Part I: The Accidental Learner



Column Editor: **Jared Alexander Seay** (Media & Services Coordinator, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424; Phone: 843-953-1428) <seayj@cofc.edu> blogs.cofc.edu/seayj

Does using a game to teach actually work? If so, to what degree does it work? Without fully admitting (yet) to a full-blown existential crisis, such thoughts of imparting knowledge to students using the medium of games or gaming or gamification has given me pause. I suppose this often happens when one starts to apply a pet pedagogy only to find that real life is a bit more complicated than what’s on paper. It’s not unlike the feeling one gets after acquiring a new puppy, and thoughts of

“what was I thinking” pop up during moments of cleaning “accidents” off the carpet and finding your third pair of chewed up shoes. It is that moment of fleeting panic when you realize you are fully committed now and turning back would be as painful as chucking the whole idea. Though this may not be an existential crisis, I think it is at least a panic attack.

About a month or so ago my application was accepted for a small teaching grant to create escape rooms for teaching. The application

narrative is a bit more complicated than your traditional escape game experience. But, without getting into details, let’s just say that my concept includes several game mechanics in addition to traditional escape games. The concept is, I believe, sound. But, of course, now it is time to make it work practically. Practical application: a tricky thing that.

Throughout this column, and most of my waking life, I have extolled the virtues of the

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application of games to teaching. To be sure, I am still convinced that is the case — having read theory and applied it aplenty off the record. I am now in the position of proving it in an official way. Now I have to find my money and put it where my mouth is. Finding the money was the easy part. Finding my mouth ... well ...

So, how does one go about turning a traditional lecture lesson into a game anyway? How about turning a game into a lesson? Do you make something fun into a learning experience or do you make a learning experience fun? What if you could do both? What if you have no clue? Or what if you have a clue, but no leads?

Fortunately, I have two grant colleagues who are in this boat with me and share my burden. We spent many hours contemplating these very questions. Theme before content? Content before theme? Mechanics in there somewhere. Fun and learning integrated. Where to start? Fortunately, fate and a crazy — yet practical — project intervened this summer to assist. Because, when one is up against an unyielding project, what better way to stimulate one's brain than to add another project that is easy, stimulating and way more fun?

Earlier this summer I was "contracted" to produce an escape game for a Science Summer Camp. My teenage children have regularly at-

tended this summer camp for years, and I heard that the camp director was looking for some "fun" activities that she could offer for electives. I seized on this, immediately seeing a chance to gain some experience in creating an escape room and a ready-made (and willing) group of play testers. And the best part is this activity did not have to actually "teach" anything. I was told that this was to be a "fun" "elective" activity among a myriad of other such fun stuff available to the campers. The goal was just "fun." Pressure off!

The theme for this summer camp was Mars and Stars. Basically, it was about the science and adventure of space exploration — particularly that involving the red planet and Martian colonization. Escape rooms traditionally have some sort of hyperbolic issue that involves getting out of the room before you die in some horrible or interesting way. Your demise could come by being eaten by zombies or suffocation by drowning or air lock malfunction or just being caught by bad guys or the warden, or the police or the gestapo or a disgruntled alien. So, naturally my first thought was that this should be a crash landing on Mars survival scenario. What could more anxiety producing than that?

And so it was that I spent the better part of six weeks concocting such an escape room adventure. My participants were science campers from ages 11 to 17 who were theoretically doing the game in three or more similar age groups. With the pressure off to actually teach something, I was free to make this activity just

mindless fun. So, of course I set out to make it more than that. I don't think fun is ever really mindless. It does not have to have a point. But, it can be — and should be — inspiring ... if only to the game designer...as indeed, it was.

I think my biggest take-away from this — a grand insight about designing any creative production — is that content may be king, but experience is the goddess. Whether designing a game or a lesson plan or a birthday party, content alone does not make it a successful event. Indeed, content is integral to the core concept, but it is the experience that hooks the participants and stays with them. The event succeeds or fails according to the special sauce — the positive experiences and take away memories of the participants and students or party folk. I recently read a quote about public speaking that said, "Before you can get their minds, you have to grab their emotions." Indeed, it is not only a war that has been lost by not securing "hearts and minds."

Now I shall not go into detail about what I actually did to pull off the whole "having fun while learning" thing. I must save something for part two after all. To be sure, this was my first attempt at a "learning" escape room, and I am sure it was far from perfect. Still, I concentrated on the "fun" and engaging aspect of the game, and my escape game ended up being heavy on theater and theme. The learning aspect was intertwined with role-play, and puzzles and car-

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tography skills and deep thinking and colorful lights. By all accounts all of the participants had a blast, had fun and did learn a great deal about the science and necessities and danger and adventure in planning and executing a mission to Mars. The trick seemed to be that it was not necessarily fun to learn about those Mars and space things. But, in the process of having fun in the experience (by surviving a crash landing on Mars), the participants learned things — not the least of which was cooperation and problem solving under pressure. Indeed, hearts and minds were grabbed.

So, this games in education thing can actually work. I look forward to applying it directly to teaching library skills. Seeing my students having fun in a library instruction class is a particular secret fantasy of mine. I can hardly wait. Learning may not always be fun. But, one can more easily learn something while having fun. So, up with the online catalog and bring on the smoke machine! 🚬

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Recommended Readings

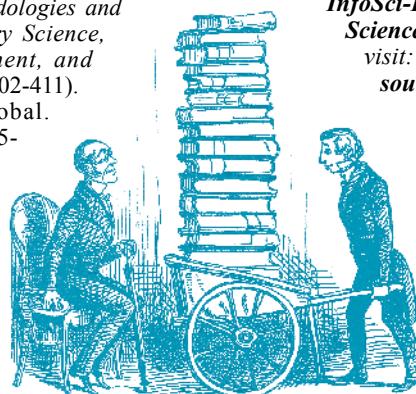
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